

A/PPOPOS, Atlas of Precious Publicly Owned Private Objects and Spaces

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Introduction – The following essay is embedded in the PhD in the Arts that I am currently undertaking at Hasselt University and the PXL-MAD School of Arts in Hasselt. My PhD research is called *Urban Jewellery, Bejewelled Cities*. It explores the interrelation between jewellery and the city, and how, as a potential democratic context for the jewellery field and by extension the design field, jewellery in the guise of socio-cultural artefacts can intertwine with the public space. In this text, an essay-in-fragments, I focus on the dichotomy between private and public, which are notions that are challenged in the discourses of both contemporary jewellery and the public domain. The text reflects my thoughts on the social significance of personal and publicly owned possessions. It is my response to the request of jewellery designers Pavol Prekop and Katarína D. F. Siposová to write a theoretical reflection on the social aspect of personal objects and their need for interaction with the viewer for their project *View from the Other Side*.

A/PPOPOS, Atlas of Precious Publicly Owned Private Objects and Spaces, is a list of urban features, spaces, entities, objects and activities, such as “the windowsill”, “two missing cats” and “a golden car”, which all share an alternating hierarchy between public and private. Similar to jewellery and other precious ornaments, these features, spaces, entities, objects and activities “wander” between inside and outside, simultaneously or interchangeably between privateness and publicness. The text’s approach takes its inspiration from *Privately Owned Public Spaces*, *POPS* for short, where privately owned spaces are legally required to be open to the public, albeit contested because they often result from deals between city governments and private real estate developers in exchange for an exemption from regular building regulations (such as, for

example, building higher than officially permitted).¹ Consequently, these hybrid spaces, often referred to as pseudo-public, question values such as democratisation, ownership and freedom of expression.

A/PPOPOS has (for now) developed into five short narratives featuring everyday observations, personal confessions, peculiarities, cold facts and the occasional academic reflection. The text centers on the urban environment, with jewellery as its backdrop, and strives for a loose style of writing. Within the trajectory of the PhD, it is a relatively early outcome that functions as a kind of opening text to introduce notions and concepts within my research areas, such as the everyday, publicity, the commons, corporeality, virtuality, intimacy and ethics of care. Although these short stories were written in response to a specific question about the social value of jewellery, they have sparked my intention to further explore these notions and concepts in the context of artistic research. Ultimately, they might even act as catalysts for future artistic interventions in public space. So this article is not a completion of this methodology, but rather a beginning. Starting from my own artistically oriented and research-focused interests, I offer a different way of observing the urban environment by approaching the city from an “embellished” perspective. I recommend reading the stories one at the time, and going for a stroll in the city in-between.

Windowsill – An aquarium and two cans of fish food; four snake plants and a cutting in a Greek yoghurt pot; two empty vases, a projector and a small black-and-gold globe; a neat row of twenty-seven children books; a light green cushion; two ceramic cats and a router; a figurine of a young man with bare torso; children’s toys and a Father’s Day craft; a candle holder, a kettle and a painted clay ashtray; six houseplants; Christmas decorations; a dinosaur-shaped money box and dried flowers; a wooden window decoration with a shepherd, two sheep and three birds; three picture frames and a stuffed camel; a cat; a “enter at your own risk” sign; a vintage educational chart of 19th century city life and a wooden rack; scented sticks, a tray with four jars and three pebbles engraved with “dream”, “hope” and “family”; a plastic bonsai tree and a disco ball. (Brederodestraat and Pieter Langendijkstraat, Amsterdam)

¹ More information on POPS, for example in New York City, is provided by the NYC Department of City Planning. See NYC Planning, (n.d.), *New York City’s Privately Owned Public Spaces*. Retrieved April 14, 2021, from <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/planning/plans/pops/pops.page>
A critical newspaper article on POPS in London was published in The Guardian. See Bradley L Garrett, (2015), *The privatisation of cities’ public spaces is escalating. It is time to take a stand*, Retrieved April 14, 2021, from <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/aug/04/pops-privately-owned-public-space-cities-direct-action>

I live on the third floor, so I don't really take part in this phenomenon. But on my way into town I am often captivated by what happens in those approximately eight inches of space between street and living room, the windowpane and the curtain, inside and outside. Much has been written about the window as a symbolic representation of dualistic notions such as openness and closure, the here and the beyond (in Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetic of Spaces*),² the framing of the visible and invisible in contrast to the understudied and understated windowsill, which can be considered an alternative interface between public and private.

Like jewellery, windowsills are private zones where residents can openly express their individuality without immediately giving you the key to the front door. It is first and foremost an urban phenomenon: sharing these kinds of displays with mainly unknown passers-by for an exceedingly short period of time, usually no longer than it takes to pass by. The accessorizing of the interior shelf and the arrangement of objects can be described as public adornment of a private space, offering outsiders a glimpse of the arranger's personality. Is the Christmas decoration signalling appreciation of fun and cosiness, or does the dust on it, plus the fact that we celebrated Christmas about four months ago, confirm laxness, or maybe a careless mentality?

The variety of presented items is comparable to a wide assortment of jewellery, ranging from carefully selected objects to a hotchpotch of non-descriptive merchandise. The spectrum on display stretches from a series of well-preserved old children's books to faded plastic hellebores, comparable to the variety between an inherited brooch set with expensive diamonds and a three-pack of earrings for € 4.95 from *Bijou Brigitte*.³ For the windowsill's user, aesthetics merge with a practicality that effortlessly engages with functionality. But despite man's illustrative implementations, the windowsill's primary functions are structural: holding the window in place and preventing water from seeping in. Also, looking at the actual windowsills on my route, they hardly vary: white is the predominant colour, the differences in depth, width and height are minimal. In themselves, windowsills are the most ordinary fibulae among the building elements: they are functional, straightforward, and definitely no status symbols.

² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 1984 (originally published in 1957).

³ Bijou Brigitte, *Oorknopjes – Wood Set*, (n.d.), Retrieved March 10, 2021, from <https://www.bijou-brigitte.com/nl/sieraden/nieuw/oorknopjes-wood-set>



1. Cat & Internet, February 2021, Brederodestraat, Amsterdam.

Wire – The streets of Antwerp, Amsterdam, London, Strasbourg, Venice and Vienna are no longer public spaces. At least for the orthodox Jewish community, which has succeeded in transforming the public realm into a private zone, merely by putting up a metal wire. On the *Sabbath*, from the moment it begins on Friday at sundown, orthodox Jews are not allowed to move objects outside their domestic spaces. All through Saturday they are forbidden to carry keys or wallets, to take books to the synagogue, or to push prams or wheelchairs in the street. In the *Talmud*, a collection of writings that represents the Jewish oral law, public space has been described as an open space where more than 600.000 people pass by. Thus, a fenced-in area where less than 600,000 people pass by is a private area, right?

Enter the metal wire (and river, railway and highway). Or more accurately, do not go beyond the metal wire (and river, railway and highway). More than one hundred years ago, in 1902, the Antwerp Jewish community installed an *Eruv*, a symbolic and imaginary enclosure that turns the inner city of Antwerp into private domain. Unique in Belgium but installed worldwide in numerous cities,⁴ these enduring parameters are mainly formed by geographical borders such as rivers (the Scheldt on the west side of Antwerp), harbours (the docks on the north side), railways and highways (line 27, 59 and the Antwerp ring road at the south and east side) next to fences, buildings and city walls. However, if the landscape does not offer such boundaries, actual metal wires between posts are installed. And then you have your private space.

⁴ For a complete overview of all Eruv's. See Levi Yaakov and Jonah, (n.d.), *Definitive Eruv Information and Global Directory*. Retrieved April 16, 2021, from <https://www.eruv.org/>

Where is the jewellery connection, you may ask? The *Eruv* has both a poetic and compelling character that is apparently easily accepted within Judaism, although it is not without controversy as opponents consider it to be a religious intrusion of public property. However, Antwerp citizens nearly trip over Madonna-statues in the city centre without complaining. As an artist, I can only appreciate the union of the visual simplicity and abstraction with the underlying, sophisticated concept. Actually, I cannot imagine a more beautiful necklace for the city. Since all *Eruv*'s are of the modest type, the only improvement I can think of is a rather small customization to better suit the specific character of each city, such as a golden wire for boastful Vienna or a three-stranded one for bustling Manhattan. Maybe adding a refined clasp could symbolically refer to allowing or even inviting others into a realm that is normally restricted to devotees. By checking the entire *Eruv* every Friday to be able to repair any damage in time before the *Sabbath*, it is cherished and meticulously maintained like a delicate necklace with worn-out links and a brittle clasp, still worn to the weekly party but prudently tucked away under a high collar in the meantime.



2. The Antwerp *Eruv*, April 2021, Nassaubrug, Antwerp.

Conversation – The temperature barely rises above zero degrees. She suggests getting a cup of coffee to keep us warm. I ask how she is doing. It feels like a meaningless question, out of place given her precarious situation. Not because I do not wish to know how she feels, but because people are passing us by on all sides, walking at a slightly faster pace than we are. The question sounds too intimate for the environment in which we find ourselves.

The public and the private have been turned upside down during the COVID-19 pandemic. The public space has been labelled dangerous by health ministers and experts such as virologists and ICU doctors, who have appeared on television every day for more than a year, without exception. Knowing that news published on Twitter and other social media in the morning is often old news by the evening, this ongoing

broadcast signals the situation's seriousness. Normally, the internet functions as a modern-day "Acta Urbana" – a virtual wall poster, hovering between temporary and lifelong, no longer chiselled in stone and hung in public squares as in ancient times. Due to COVID-19, people on the street or in the supermarket behave like ponderous dancers who don't want to shuffle with anybody else. Public activities like working, shopping, socialising and travelling have been curtailed. We have been forced to withdraw into domestic zones. However, the public zone outside has been designated as the safest place to meet people so there is little choice but to move our private encounters into an exterior environment.

I struggle with the lack of intimacy of the public space, and so does the city. The jewel that normally comforts us is now brutally exposed to friend and foe. But at the same time, the public domain seems to have a soothing effect on people. City-dwellers are reclaiming their city and a new form of *in-town-ness* emerges. My friend and I finally find a place to sit in an almost empty playground, too chilly for children, other people more than the contested one and half meters away (when the virus is no longer among us, the vaccines have done their work and the restrictions have been abandoned, I suggest forever banning one and half meters from our metric system like a buried treasure, tucked away in Pandora's box). My friend and I continue our conversation; what she tells me is far from rosy.



3. (No) Bench, February 2021, Jan Pieter Heijestraat, Amsterdam.

Car – It was a grey, cold, drizzly day. The traffic was moving at a walking pace. Biking fast, head down, on my way home. My attention was drawn by reflective raindrops sparkling like little gems set in the car's bodywork. Between a company's van specializing in fire extinguishing systems and a modest light-grey Peugeot, the gold-wrapped *Mercedes-AMG G 63* – yes, I searched online for the model's name – stood out: "A legendary off-road vehicle with the performance of a top athlete" according to the

Mercedes-Benz website.⁵ What else to expect from a modest house on wheels, priced at € 262.878. Oh Lord, Janis and me are wondering what the driver's colour television and night on the town might look like.⁶

The tinted windows combined with a veil of rain prevented me from seeing the driver's face or the car's interior; the passengers were clearly keen on their privacy. In a strict sense, a car is a private place, but encircled by (un-tinted) windows it is probably the most public private place there is. The car in itself, like an exuberant piece of jewellery, could function as a prestige emblem. The Mercedes flaunts itself like a statement necklace at a Swiss millionaire's ball, though not quite so sparkly anymore, more in an after the party-gleam, given the weather conditions and its heading out of town. Inside most cars small props are visible from the street, often dangling from the rear-view mirror like an earring wobbling to the rhythm of one's steps, bearing a similarity with sentimental, personal jewellery: a car dressed up with an *arbremagique*, an evil eye, a dream catcher or a baby shoe can reveal a tidy, superstitious or spiritual character. But I guess a golden car needs no extra accessories.

In case you think that a car is just a means of transport to get you from point a to point b, the same applies to jewellery: even the most trivial, trinket-like, knick-knack ornament has a story to tell about the person wearing it. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the *Mercedes-AMG G 63*, which is way more pronounced than the majority of the 234,000 registered cars in Amsterdam. The oversized, customised, gold-wrapped car with its tinted windows is a showstopper among lavish, dazzling crown jewels. It is the ultimate contemporary symbol of wealth and recognition of status, touching upon the material, economic and identity-defining values of jewellery.



4. *Mercedes-AMG G 63*, November 2021, Jan Evertsenstraat, Amsterdam.

⁵ Mercedes-Benz. *G-Rex*, (n.d.), Retrieved March 19, 2021, from <https://www.mercedes-benz.com/en/vehicles/passenger-cars/g-class/mercedes-amg-g-63/>

⁶ Janis Joplin, Michael McClure and Bob Neuwirth, Mercedes Benz [recorded by Janis Joplin], *On Pearl* [Album], 1971.

Missing cats – I wasn't heartbroken about it, but the idea that I had lost my ring forever made me feel uneasy. I was not particularly attached to it, yet even 19 years later I remember exactly what the ring looked like: a 1 cm wide, matt silver ring finished with a copper band on both edges, with small round holes all around, also set off with copper. I bought it in Barcelona, directly from the maker and it only fitted the index finger of my left hand. Well, fitted, the fact that I no longer possess the ring conclusively disproves this assertion. It was mostly the losing in itself that gave me a feeling of discomfort. Or maybe the now imaginary ring had grown on me after it had imperceptibly slipped off my finger, and my unease stemmed from the idea that such an intimate object had been publicly exposed after its loss, available for anyone to grab.

The story of my lost ring crossed my mind when I ran into Topsy and Polat. Or rather, the posters that announced that Topsy and Polat, two most adorable cats, had gone missing. The posters were affixed to an electricity substation located on the edge of a city park, the hasty application revealing the desperation of the cat owners in question. The self-printed A4 sheets were surrounded by unimaginative graffiti tags, alongside a sticker of the activist group *Extinction Rebellion*. Topsy and Polat, though probably not together, had ventured into the urban jungle. They were no longer pampered in their domestic space but now left to the mercy of caretakers of the public sphere. I hope they met.

In turn, Topsy and Polat prompted me to look for the box containing jewellery pieces I found on the street, solitary souls missing their partners: a bunch of single hoop earrings, chipped bracelets and solitary beads covered in cuts and bruises, crushed by feet, run over by bikes and cars, worn out by city-life. They had all the symptoms of not being worth caring for, yet I did. Although the scratches reveal their cheap manufacture and inferior materials, the marks of the city make these lost ornaments all the more valuable to me. In any case, they took away my concern that I did not seem to be attached to any piece of jewellery. Perhaps I cherish more than I proclaim to do.



5. Polat& Topsy, March 2021, Erasmus park, Amsterdam.

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